Teaching Literature to undergraduate engineering students – a journey in the making

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Here are some of my thoughts on my ideas on teaching, and inputs from my experience:

1. The foremost concern of a teacher in an HSS dept of an IIT is to show the undergraduate students the raison d'etre of an HSS education. It is a serious concern owing to a pervasive social understanding of successful education as providing market-driven dividends. The looming market-presence on education, where the value of what is learnt is determined by how much you can earn from learning it, puts the reading of Literature in a spot for engineering undergraduates. I circumvent this obstacle in my initial classes by showing that learning in a Literature course is paradigmatically different from that in a Science or Engineering course. That makes the setting a challenging one for students whose curiosity is triggered.

   For one, Literary texts do not solve problems, but raise questions which do not have unequivocal/univocal answers. These questions are valuable for their own sakes, and their answers can vary depending on contextual interpretation, the reader's experience etc. This is usually a new idea to the engineering undergrads and requires them to look at a text in a way they are not used to. Learning in a Literature class is different from a Science class also because of factors like ambivalence in place of binaries as an accepted mode of understanding.

2. From day one in IIT Bombay, I have used only the blackboard for teaching, and continue to do so. My few attempts [probably less than a dozen times in 25 years] at using slides have failed for the reason that they freeze the flow of ideas that interaction in class facilitates. Often, discussions in class go beyond the frames or even trajectories set on the slides.

   The classroom environment becomes dynamic when a teacher talks to the students, making eye-contact, conversing and arguing, instead of moving slides on a projector. The latter technique renders a human presence redundant, an idea whose implications can extend to the logical outcome of a classroom itself being redundant.

3. I do not see the student as a passive consumer or receptor[1]. Often I learn from students as well as teach them. Getting students to engage in discussions in class involves them in a way that makes them feel integral to the process. This feeling of involvement on their part is important, as often engineering undergraduates tell me with a wry grin that their departmental teachers do not know them by name. This I find a dehumanising experience and terribly out of place in such a setting as a classroom, which has a huge formative impact on students.

4. Encouraging students to participate in class makes them feel they are necessary components in the process. When during this process students make mistakes as they will, it is important to show that mistakes are perfectly okay and part of the learning. Though this may sound like an idealistic statement, the practical gains are in fact enormous. The obsession with getting it right all the time is part of the environment of stress as emphasis is laid on the outcome [grades] rather than the process itself. People perform much better when

[1] I am appending an excerpt from Dickens' novel where he caricatures the education system and also by extension Bentham's Utilitarian philosophy. I read it to my students and they find it both hilarious and recognisable.

not stressed, and their attitude to learning is more positive. Instead of fear and anxiety being the emotions driving learning, curiosity and excitement become the drivers so that learning itself becomes more efficient.

5. With a view to accomplishing [4] I try to see how I can make quizzes and exams fun and unconventional, where there are many right answers, but more importantly, the student's journey of arriving at the answer is more the focus than just the answer.

6. I try to find ways of students engaging with my discipline even after exams and grades. Not in the way that one reads a book to kill time, but because reading to challenge oneself becomes an exciting exercise for them. Social media came to my help, and I have a facebook page where we read texts which we were not able to for time-constraints in class, or just books someone wanted to read in the group. This page was very active from 2012 to 2020. One of the very interesting books we read there was *A Clockwork Orange*. I had refused to read it in class because I believed that it did not take a sufficiently objectionable view to teen violence. Another book we read on facebook was DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* that won the Man Booker prize, and where we got the author to interact briefly with us.

I want to end this with two titles I usually recommend for students to read:

1. *Poetic Justice: the literary imagination and public life* by Martha Nussbaum, which persuasively argues how literature builds empathy and therefore is productive of humane perceptions and judgements in courts. Among the novels she picks to illustrate this are *Hard Times* [Charles Dickens] and *Invisible Man* [Ralph Ellison].

   > *Public discourse has become increasingly vitriolic and punitive toward those who don't seem to fit America's "mainstream." Relying excessively on stereotypes and models of human behavior based on economic self-interest, we too often fail–in public policy-making, legislation, and judicial reasoning–to see one another as fully human. In Poetic Justice, one of our most prominent philosophers and public intellectuals explores how literature can contribute to a more just society. As readers of literature, Nussbaum argues, we may glimpse the interior experiences of other people. Above all, reading asks us to imagine the value of their lives. Through such works as Hard Times and Native Son, Nussbaum shows how novels and novel reading develop a fully humanistic, not pseudo-scientific, conception of public reasoning. She brilliantly illustrates how the literary imagination is not opposed to public rationality, but is an essential ingredient of just public discourse and a democratic society.*
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   > – From dust jacket

2. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi – which shows how literature and its imaginative world helped students of a secret transgressive reading group in Tehran, cope with the repressive regime following the revolution – not by escaping into fantasy, but by enabling them with insights on what dictatorship actually meant, how it could be confronted by you and me, ordinary citizens – with the help of such an unlikely and misunderstood novel as *Lolita*.